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An investigation of the cognitive processes underlying soccer coaches' decision-making during competition

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The ability of coaches to make effective decisions that can impact positively on a team's performance during competition is a fundamental skill in coaching, especially in fast, dynamic team sports such as soccer. Yet, there has been little research attention given to exploring the thought processes underpinning coaches' decision-making during soccer match-play. We used a think aloud protocol analysis to explore the cognitions of skilled ($n = 10$) and less-skilled ($n = 10$) adult soccer coaches while required to watch and coach one of the teams during a sequence of representative videos clips of a soccer match first-half. The clips offered a perspective view from the dugout and were played in chronological order to provide a realistic representation of the match context. At the end of the first-half, coaches were also asked to verbalize their thoughts about what they would say to the team at half-time. During first-half match-play, skilled coaches verbalized a greater percentage of thoughts related to performance and tactical evaluations, and the planning of actions, whereas less-skilled coaches mostly monitored the ongoing game actions or events (all $ps < .05$). Moreover, during half-time skilled soccer coaches generated a greater proportion of relevant planning strategies that aimed to improve team performance for the second half than less-skilled participants ($p < .05$). Our findings suggest that skilled soccer coaches' more advanced memory representations of the game enable them to easily retrieve task-specific information in order to make more relevant evaluations and plan better strategic decisions compared with their less skilled counterparts.